Chapter 24

When Two Homes Are Better Than One:

Collaborating on Cross-Institutional Research

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INTRODUCTION

There are many advantages to cross-institutional collaboration. They include access to a wider network of professionals for connections and support as well as the opportunity to draw on resources at multiple institutions. Furthermore, we have found that cross-institutional collaborations help librarian practitioner-researchers gain a more nuanced perspective of their research questions and objectives and challenge them to think about how findings might apply in different contexts.

In this chapter, we describe the process of working on a cross-institutional study. We begin with background information on our study's aims and methods and then move on to the nuts and bolts of collaborating on a research project with librarians at other institutions. We discuss designing a research project, applying for IRB approval at multiple institutions, obtaining funding, collaborating on data analysis and the literature review process, project management and communicating, establishing realistic timeframes and goals, and collaborating on writing up and disseminating your research. We conclude the chapter with a reflection on the value of cross-institutional research and lessons learned from our experience.

BACKGROUND

We were inspired to collaborate on a study of gender in the library and information science field after reading a blog post by librarian Allana Mayer that expressed frustration at the lack of critical research on how gender performativity works to reinforce oppression in the LIS field.[1] *Gender performativity* can be understood as "the way that one acts, walks, speaks and dresses that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman; [it is] also called gender expression."[2] *Critical research* "attempts to reveal the socio-historical specificity of knowledge and to shed light on how particular knowledges reproduce structural relations of inequality and oppression."[3] Mayer urges the profession of librarianship to think critically about ways that normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and other identity categories intersect with notions of "fit" and professionalism to produce workplaces that reinforce oppression and marginalization. She ends her blog post by proposing a list of relevant questions that a researcher could use to begin exploring this complex topic. This list of questions served as the foundation of the interview questionnaire we used in our study.

Our study explored the way that gender performances, in combination with other social identities such as race, class, and sexual orientation, can serve as professional resources and obstacles for librarians. We conducted twenty-nine in-depth interviews over the phone with library workers at public, academic, and special libraries as well as a self-employed librarian and one who works at an archive. We analyzed the interview transcripts by coding them first individually, then together, using a combination of asynchronous and synchronous methods (Excel spreadsheets, Dedoose, and NVivo for coding, Google Docs for writing analytic memos, and Google Hangouts and phone calls for discussions). We chose a qualitative methodology because it allowed us to explore the nuances of gender performance in the workplace as they are experienced by library workers.

It is inevitable that any research study will encounter hurdles and setbacks, and we were no exception. In our case, a number of these challenges stemmed from the fact that all three of us work at different institutions. In the rest of the chapter, we discuss these challenges, how we met them, and what we would do differently if we were starting again from scratch. We hope our reflections will be valuable for others who are thinking of embarking on research with colleagues at other institutions.

NUTS AND BOLTS OF CONDUCTING A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL STUDY

Research Design

Realistic research design is imperative when collaborating across institutions. Our case involved co-writing and editing our survey instruments, codebook, analysis, and publication(s). However, one or more of these steps can be taken individually if agreed upon by the team. As far as our research methods, the team decided to conduct interviews early on. We conducted phone interviews because the logistics of successfully completing video interviews and securing the data according to IRB standards were beyond our capabilities at the time. We decided to limit the scope of our participant pool to the US in part because of this phone interview constraint.

As far as identifying research collaborators, our PI was able to easily reach out to an established network of LIS workers trained in research methods to solicit partners. Each partner had training in qualitative research methodology and understanding of the social science research process. Skill and comfort levels with research design and methods will be harder to understand and accommodate if research partners have not achieved a relative standard of methodological literacy. One recommendation to alleviate literacy or comfort differentials is for the team or individual members to audit a research methods course or complete a MOOC to get up to speed. Another possibility would be to pair with a mentor who could guide you through the research project. This might be a more experienced researcher at your library or at a different institution or a researcher in a different department on campus.

Obtaining IRB Approval for a Multi-Site Project

Obtaining approval from your Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is a necessary component of human subject research, can be a daunting task for any researcher. When your study involves researchers at multiple institutions, the process of getting IRB approval can be more complicated, as we learned with our project. First, determine if your institution has a center for cross-institutional project coordination that can guide you in this process or that provides access to free platforms that support cross-institutional scientific research project management.

Deciding who will take on the role of the principal investigator (PI) is an important early step for any research project with multiple team members. The PI is the primary point person with the office that administers IRB, is listed as the contact on participant consent forms, and is "ultimately responsible for the ethical conduct of human subjects research and for compliance with federal regulations, applicable state and local law, and university policies."[4] After talking to our respective research offices, we determined that it was possible to designate one of our institutions as the IRB of record and to have the institutions enter into an agreement to cede review to this external IRB. Because it was necessary for all the institutions to have access to the IRB application materials before they could cede review, we each submitted separate IRB applications as principal investigators at our own institutions and designated the University of Southern California—Rebecca's institution at the time—as the IRB of record.

We obtained IRB approval relatively easily but encountered two unexpected complications before we were able to begin the data collection process. First, Rebecca started a job at a new institution, which meant that USC could no longer be the IRB of record and we would have to reapply for IRB approval at her new institution. Second, we determined that our study was likely to be classified as "exempt research," which would allow for the quickest turnaround from IRB. However, we learned that Ohio State University does not cede review to an external IRB for exempt research, so Hilary had to submit a separate IRB application for approval by her Office of Research IRB. Navigating these requirements meant more paperwork and back and forth with our offices of research, which meant postponing our recruitment and data collection timeframe by several months.

Obtaining Funding

Receiving institutional research grants was critical for our project's success, as it allowed us to fund our interview transcriptions as well as professional travel opportunities to present our findings. We received both university-wide and library-specific grants from USC, UO, and OSU for our project; however, we had to relinquish unused funds when a team member left their respective institution.

We came away from this experience with a strengthened understanding of how much the status of individual team members at their institutions can make a difference when it comes to opportunities for funding and institutional support. During the course of designing and conducting the study, all three team members moved to positions at new institutions; these job changes involved changes in academic status (staff to faculty and vice versa) and in types of institution. Our experience showed us just how much faculty or pre-tenure status can matter when it comes to the types of awards and grants one is eligible for (as well as the support they receive to pursue them) at their institution. This is an important consideration for librarian research teams since academic librarian job classifications can vary immensely from one institution to another.

Collaborating on Data Analysis and Literature Reviews

Collaborating on qualitative coding and other forms of data analysis can be challenging for cross-institution teams. Team members at different institutions may not have access to the same analysis tools and software programs through their institutions. Web-based tools can make it easier for two or more users to collaborate from different locations but may not have some of the functionality that desktop programs offer. Ideally, cross-institution teams should explore the different options for analysis tools, weighing the importance of factors such as cost or availability through institutional licenses, ease of use, and ability to collaborate on and synchronize data analysis, before getting started on their project. Realistically, however, choosing what tool to use is likely to be a trial-and-error process; we would encourage teams to make sure their data is organized, backed up, and saved in a file type that can be imported into different types of programs.

Our team tried a few different analysis tools. We started out with Dedoose (https://www.dedoose.com/), which is a web-based, relatively low-cost tool that we paid for using the funds from one of the institutional grants we had obtained. We were able to complete one round of coding and create a preliminary codebook using Dedoose. However, when the team member who had secured the grant went to a different institution, we faced the question of whether to pay out-of-pocket for Dedoose or investigate other options. Around this time, one of the other team members got access to NVivo (http://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/nvivo-products) through an institutional license. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis desktop program with very robust functionality. Although it does not lend itself to collaboration as well as Dedoose, we decided that the range of analysis options it provided made it worth incorporating into our analysis process. Ultimately, we decided to do a round of coding together using a shared Microsoft Excel file; Hilary then imported the data and codes into NVivo, ran NVivo queries based on what the team decided it wanted to look at, and then exported the queries into Excel files to share with the other team members.

Research teams may also want to make use of research tools for their literature review process. There are several tools that can make sharing notes on readings easy, including citation managers (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley, Endnote, RefWorks) and cloud file storage and note-taking applications (e.g., Google Drive, OneNote, Dropbox, Box). In our case, all three of our team members had experience with Zotero (https://www.zotero.org), a free citation management tool that allows you to set up group libraries. We set up a shared group library for our literature review to which we could each add readings. We divided up the task of who would read what and wrote notes for the other research team members to review. Again, teams will want to evaluate factors including cost or availability through institutional licenses, ease of use and collaboration, and the amount of storage space needed.

Project Management and Communication

Being in different locations presents some obvious challenges for cross-institution teams when it comes to project management, data management, and communication. Throughout our process, we trialed multiple communication, data storage, and project management tools to streamline the process, including email, Google Docs Suite, Google Hangouts, Slack.com, an institutional subscription to Box.com, and SMS text. We introduced and quickly stopped utilizing Slack.com partway through the process, as it was overkill for our small team's needs, and we determined that email along with regular check-ins over Google Hangouts was the easiest way for us to communicate. Another challenge we ran into was the lack of a shared secure server space where we could store and retrieve our data. We ultimately decided to keep our raw data files in an institutional subscription of Box (a cloud-based storage service) after we determined it was possible to add collaborators from outside the institution.

Although deciding on (and to sticking to) methods for communicating about the research project can be difficult, particularly when your team members are in different time zones, these are good things to discuss at the outset of your project. How often will you communicate and who will serve the role of project manager/organizer? Will you communicate asynchronously (via email, Google docs, etc.), synchronously (via phone, Skype, etc.), or both? Does it work best for everyone's schedules to set a recurring weekly or biweekly check-in meeting, or is it more feasible to schedule check-ins on an ad-hoc basis?

Data storage is another aspect of the project management workflow that can be complicated when team members are at different institutions. Unlike the methods you use to communicate as a team, establishing your data storage plan upfront is not just a good idea but will likely be required by your IRB. Where will you store your data, and will everyone on the team have access to it? Although having different institutional cloud- or server-based storage systems can make data management trickier but certainly not impossible.

Another project management issue a cross-institutional team will likely run into is deciding how to divide up project responsibilities in a way that is fair and that makes the best use of each person's specific skill set and the institutional resources to which they have access. This is particularly the case for librarian practitioner-researchers, who often do not have access to the type of infrastructure and support that can make a research study run smoothly (e.g., a dedicated project manager or research assistants). One way we suggest dividing responsibilities is by asking each team member what they are best at and/or what skill they would like the chance to improve. In our case, for example, Tatiana used MS Excel techniques to clean, organize, and randomize our participant data in order to help us select who to contact for interviews. Hilary had access to NVivo via her institution and wanted to learn how to use it, so she took responsibility for running queries as part of the data analysis process. Rebecca, our PI, volunteered to do most of the literature review because this was a personal strength for her.

Reflecting on this experience, there are two things we wish we had done at the beginning: create a shared research diary and an author collaboration agreement. A research diary is "a written record of the researcher's activities, thoughts and feelings throughout the research process from design, through data collection and analysis to writing and presenting the study."[5] While research diaries are useful for solo researchers, they can be particularly helpful for multi-researcher teams whose primary mode of communication is not face-to-face. Documenting major milestones, obstacles, and questions are useful months or years into the research process, especially when writing for publication. A research diary is a tool that is more dependable than relying on email, which you may lose access to if you leave an institution. We also suggest that you consider creating an author collaboration agreement in order to make sure everyone is on the same page about who has agreed to do what work. Note that cross-institutional research mandates collaboration, and, as such, individual team members should always have a voice in decisions but may not direct or control all or certain aspects of the research study (unless negotiated and agreed upon).

Establishing Realistic Timeframes and Goals

How might you ascertain if your timeframe and goals are realistic? It depends on the scope of your research project, which you determine. Consider how many research questions you have and how complex they are. Learn the parameters of your institution's support for research studies and research leave. Anticipate or reflect on any major life events on the horizon that may delay or waylay the project. Our initial one-year timeframe estimate was off base, which is likely a consequence of our novice or early-career researcher status. A few general rules-of-thumb when estimating timeframes follow. If collaborating with two institutions, assume a minimum of eighteen months, and add three more months each to account for the inclusion of any additional institutions. Accommodate for the pre-tenure or promotion status of each team member and consider how their portfolio deadlines might influence the scope and speed of the study. Allow for an additional six months in your timeframe to prepare and present your research findings in local, national, or international settings. Of course, allow for flexibility in your timeframe for when you likely encounter inevitable red tape.

As detailed earlier, we initially estimated that our research study would take one year (from IRB approval, through research design, data collection, analysis, and initial presentation and publication). In reality, it has taken almost three years from our initial team meeting to submitting a subset of our findings for publication. However, during this process, we presented our initial findings in local, regional, national, and international venues in multiple ways (posters, lightning talks, and two- or three-person presentations), efforts which conform with our values as researchers studying marginalized populations (and as stated in our IRB application), which is to disseminate our findings as early, as often, and as widely as feasible.

Accept that the research process will likely take longer than you think. This is always the case with research but even more so when there are multiple researchers and/or multiple institutions. Take this into account if you need to show productivity for tenure, promotion, etc. Think about ways you can disseminate your research sustainably, such as short presentations, posters, and sharing preliminary results via blogs and non-scholarly venues. Be up-front with other research team members about how much time you expect you can devote to the project, if you need to have a research "product" within a certain month of time, etc. A team member on tenure-track might need to get things out more quickly than someone without that pressure; they might also have more time/support from their institution than someone who is not tenure-track. In the LIS field, it is likely you or your team members will change institutions during the study, and this might change the equation for you. Some team members may have protected research time as part of their position description or negotiated in their contract. Some members may need to leave a project partway through due to unforeseen circumstances. Determine how their research contributions will be cited and acknowledged when the study is disseminated. Consider agreeing to a research/writing contract at the start of the process, which details these expectations and potentialities.

Collaborative Writing and Dissemination

From the beginning of our project, our team has kept our eyes open for opportunities to request feedback, present, and publish our research. Requesting feedback is key at different stages in the writing process, such as the first draft and prior to journal submission consideration, from a selection of people in your field (both experts and non-experts) as well as from people in your personal research networks and multidisciplinary peer writing groups. Since our study is qualitative, involves a large dataset, and has gone through several rounds of thematic analysis, we were eager to present preliminary results in order to get feedback from different communities. To date, we have presented on various aspects of our study in over half a dozen forums, with various members of the team present (from solo presentations to all three of us). As we have gone about the process of presenting at different venues, we have had conversations about who presents what, when, and where. Part of these conversations has involved our relative abilities to travel to different locations. The reality for most cross-institutional research teams is that different team members will have different levels of professional development funding and support to attend conferences, as well as different expectations about where and how much you present at conferences. Cross-institutional teams should consider ways to apportion research ownership if someone cannot travel to a conference location but another team member can. Will all members work on the presentation, even if some cannot be at the conference? If so, how will you make sure to credit everyone's work? Will the conference allow some team members to present virtually, by recording a video, or Skyping in?

All research teams, even those at the same institution, should discuss co-author attribution early in the project, but it is particularly important for cross-institution teams to do so, since having a first author attribution may be more consequential for some institutions' promotion and tenure criteria. This, as well as the different amounts of time that team members have available for writing and research, may impact how you want to go about apportioning workloads during the research and writing processes. Again, an author collaboration agreement is useful, as it can ensure that team members are accountable to each other for how much work they agreed to do.

Cross-institutional teams will also want to consider whether there are institutional factors influencing where you decide to publish your research. For example, the faculty at Ohio State University Libraries, where Hilary works, have a mandate to deposit open access (OA) versions of scholarly journal articles in their institutional repository, so we knew we needed to choose a journal that is either OA or at least would allow us to deposit a preprint. Different institutions will have different tenure and promotion criteria regarding expected publication types (e.g., LIS journals versus journals in related fields like education or "high-impact" journals versus newer or non-traditional journals) as well as how impactful certain publication criteria are in your portfolio. These factors will all influence the decision your cross-institution team comes to regarding when and where you publish.

REFLECTIONS

As this chapter details, there is a unique set of challenges that library practitioner-researchers will likely run into when embarking on a cross-institutional study. This includes challenges inherent to any study with multiple researchers (e.g., project management and effective communication), challenges that are specific to research conducted at multiple institutions (e.g., IRB and access to different research tools), and research conducted by librarian-practitioners at multiple institutions (e.g., different academic statuses and levels of institutional support for research).

Our goal in reflecting on our experience conducting a cross-institutional study and providing suggestions for how to anticipate and address likely challenges is to provide other library practitioner-researchers with a roadmap for conducting research with colleagues at other institutions. We hope this will encourage others to take a chance on cross-institutional research because this experience was so positive for us, from both a professional and personal standpoint. We have no doubt that our research was strengthened by virtue of having different institutional homes. The structure and nature of our collaboration granted us access to wider research and professional networks as well as diverse funding streams, directly contributing to the success and sustainability of research we embarked on. Just as important, this collaboration has provided us with a source of mutual support and camaraderie that has remained a constant through multiple job changes and relocations, professional challenges, and triumphs.

As you prepare for your own cross-institutional research, here are some of our lessons learned that you can take into consideration:

- Each university equips its IRB administrative body differently, and different institutions may have different requirements for IRB approval. (For example, some institutions require PIs to have faculty status.) Contact your respective IRB offices as early as possible to find out what their requirements are for a cross-institutional study; find point persons in the office if possible (some universities will have a staff member in charge of multi-site research) and get their contact information so they can be in communication with each other if necessary. It is important to know that your institution has staff members in their IRB offices who are equipped to help you through these processes. Don't hesitate to contact them and ask questions.
- Multiple institutions likely mean multiple levels of support (financial and otherwise) for research. If you are applying for research awards or grants, determine whether they can cover travel costs for team members, which can help alleviate inequitable effects of status across institutions. Determine which team member(s) has access to or can purchase necessary equipment, services, and software programs, and consider ways to divide up research activities accordingly.
- Consider that any setbacks or delays will most likely make your research stronger in the long run. For example, it took longer than we initially anticipated to validate our survey and interview guide because we sought out consultants with both academic expertise and lived experience to review them. Our research was stronger for this because we were able to reflect the changing definitions of LGBTQIA terminology in our questions.

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NOTES

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